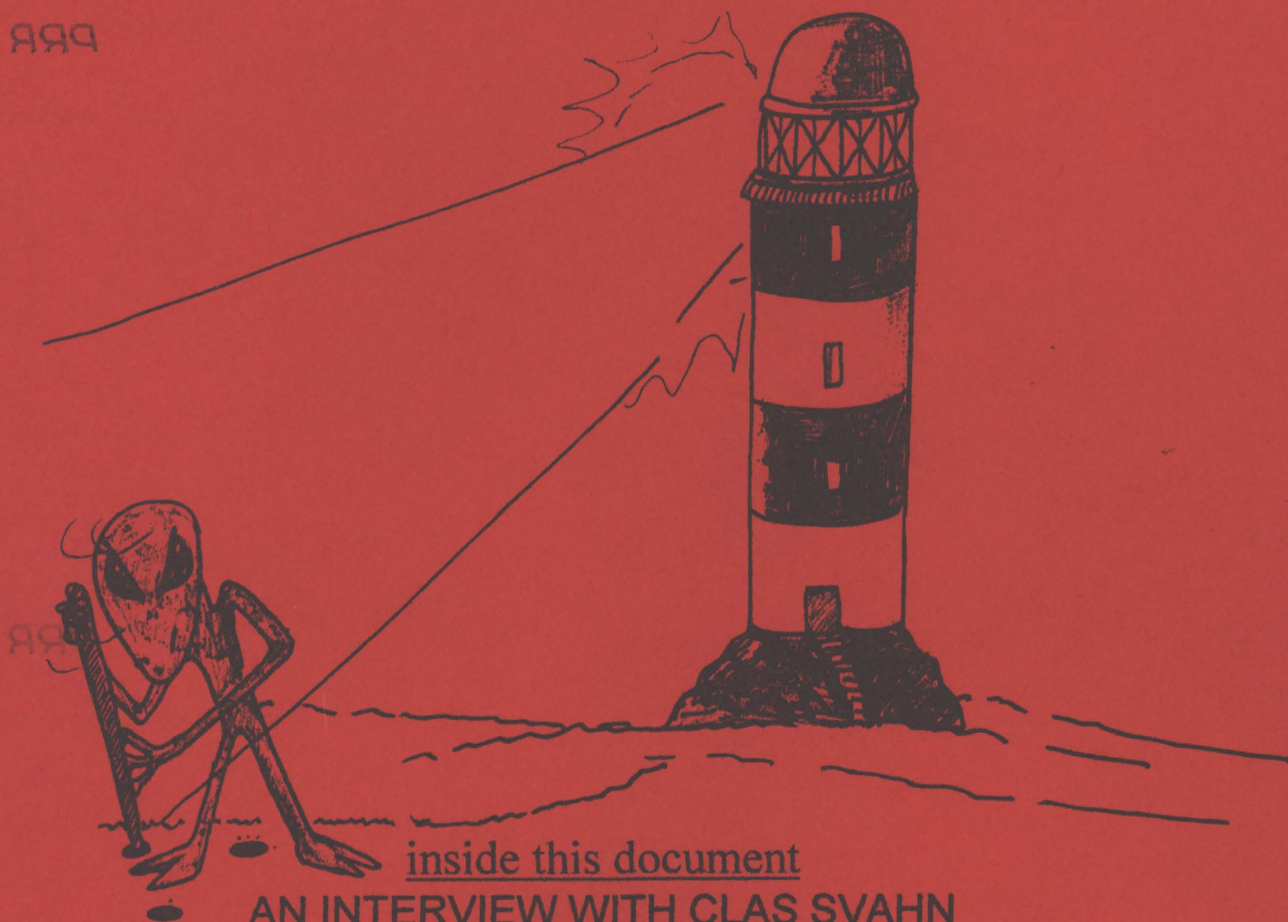


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ON THE TRAIL OF A MODERN-DAY DINOSAUR

(CONCORD MONITOR (on line) -March 2, 2001,Concord, New Hampshire)

They call it li'kela-bembe, and they revere it for its fierce reign over the Boumba river. They have never told a soul about this muscled beast that feasts on molombo fruit and pummels crocodiles with its serpentine tail - because nobody ever asked.

Nobody, that is, until last November, when Concord businessman David Woetzel went crashing through the virgin forests of Cameroon on the trail of this much-rumored but ever-elusive modern-day dinosaur.

Now, thanks in part to Woetzel, this mysterious li'kela-bembe may be roaming into range of a camera lens for the first time.

"The odds are 75 to 80 percent that these types of creatures exist," said Woetzel, who serves as president and CEO of CCR Datasystems on Airport Road when he's not slashing and slogging through African swamps.

For all his slashing and slogging, Woetzel never found the beast. But he did gather dozens of consistent eyewitness accounts from natives up and down the Boumba and Laponji rivers - compelling enough evidence to send the British Broadcasting Company and a group of scientists on a full-scale expedition to the region.

"This is big news," said Woetzel, who kept his trip a secret until this week, when the BBC group left for Cameroon. "Once this gets out, everybody and their brother will be wanting to go over there."

If they can tear themselves away from Jurassic Park III, that is. Which begs the question, why battle through the snake-infested brush of Africa on the dim hope of finding something the rest of the world seems content to relegate to theaters and museums?

Because this truly is a lost world, Woetzel says. These natives have never been prompted

by breathless reporters or primed by promises of fame and money.

In fact, Woetzel and his companion, William Gibbons, were told they were the first whites to penetrate the forest and swamps along the Boumba and Laponji rivers.

"We didn't know what to expect," said Woetzel. "We went into this pretty naïve."

Ignorant of the jungle's whims, Woetzel was, however, no newcomer to the world of dinosaurs.

He is a longtime crusader for creationism, lecturing on the topic of "Science and the Bible" all over the country. He also has his own Web site, www.genesispark.com, dedicated to the idea that humans and dinosaurs have coexisted throughout history, and makes an annual plea for creationism to a Concord High School law class.

So when he got wind of Cameroon missionaries returning to North America with stories of river-dwelling dinosaurs, Woetzel jumped at the chance to build new credence into his cause. "Everybody knows dinosaurs are supposed to be extinct. It's a huge credibility problem for evolutionists," he said.

For centuries, tales of dinosaurs have drifted up from this steamy corner of equatorial Africa. Writers and explorers have described dinosaur-like drawings on cave walls in the Congo basin, and talked of a beast called mokele-mbembe. In 1980-81, Dr. Roy Mackal gathered numerous eyewitness accounts of a river-dwelling beast with a long neck and tail inhabiting the Likouala swamp region.

In recent years, political unrest has halted such expeditions to the Congo. But the thickly forested regions of Cameroon have remained outside the fray - and unsullied by prior expeditions.

Dubbing their adventure "Behemoth or Bust" after the behemoth described in Job 40:15, Woetzel and Gibbons raised their own funds, gathered the bare necessities and (after a quick consultation with fellow beast seeker Robert Rines, a local Loch Ness enthusiast) set out for Africa. They flew to the Republic of Cameroon, bumped across the frontier to a settlement called Welele, then hired pygmy guides to trek into the interior.

Sleeping in tents and thatched huts, Woetzel and Gibbons waded through waist-deep swamps and sliced through tangled vegetation to reach the river. They ate bananas by the bushel, fought off all manner of strange bugs and learned not to drink the water.

In pockets of roughhewn civilization throughout these hostile lands, they met the Baka people, natives intimately acquainted with their surroundings and utterly fascinated by these white men.

"It would be like an alien ship had landed," Woetzel said. "The kids would come up to you and scratch your skin."

What didn't surprise the villagers were the dinosaur sketches Woetzel had brought along. To put their credibility to the test, Woetzel first showed them sketches of animals he knew existed in that region, such as crocodiles and hippos. He then showed them sketches of animals with which they wouldn't be familiar, such as grizzly bears. Finally, he showed them the sketch of the long-necked herbivore described in past sightings.

"We approached it very carefully," Woetzel said.

And the villagers passed the test every time, identifying the familiar creatures, passing over the foreign ones and pronouncing li'kela-bembe at the sight of the brontosaurus-like drawing.

It was about as big as an elephant, they said, with a snake-like head and a long, powerful tail. The people feared it for its ferocity toward other creatures, and told stories of the animal overturning canoes in search of food.

"There's no question in their mind about the existence of this creature," he said. "Consistently, village to village, they picked out the li'kela-bembe, called it the same thing, described it the same way."

Second-hand descriptions are one thing, though. What happens if someone actually finds this creature?

While mainstream science has certainly had no problem making room for new discoveries, Woetzel believes the existence of a living dinosaur, if proven, would force major changes in national parks, prestigious museums and practically every book and article on dinosaurs.

"The idea of living dinosaurs strikes people as very odd," he said. "In the same time frame that a squirrel-like creature evolved into a human being, we have these creatures that have not changed one wit."

And though Woetzel's alternative theory of creationism remains a hard-sell in the secular world, its basis - that life did not come about by chance - may be gaining followers. Within the last decade, a new scientific approach known as the Intelligent Design movement has taken hold in some circles, calling into question the cornerstone Darwinian philosophy of Naturalism.

Scientific theories aside, Woetzel's adventure is, if nothing else, a conversation starter that titillates with all the water-glass ripple effect of Jurassic Park.

"I start talking to people about it - my doctor, my mechanic - and they won't let me out the door," he said.